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*Steal not this book my honest friend*¹

Threats, Warnings, and Curses in the Edwardian Book

Lauren Alex O'Hagan

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of the book inscription as an important rite of property in Edwardian Britain (1901–1914). In particular, it uses a multimodal ethnohistorical approach to examine the use of ownership marks as threats, warnings, and curses, and to explore how they were employed by their owners to deter potential malefactors. It reveals that these inscriptions were discursive acts that operated on a cline of politeness that stretched from mitigated to stronger ownership claims. However, while in the Medieval period book curses carried a serious threat of punishment, by the Edwardian era, most were written out of adherence to social tradition, thus their force lay in performing rather than describing a future act. This suggests that in the early twentieth century, book inscriptions were strongly linked to their owners' social class and functioned symbolically to index ownership, property rights, and power.

*If anyone take away this book, let him die the death; let him be fried in a pan;
let the falling sickness and fever seize him; let him be broken on the wheel, and
hanged. Amen. —Anonymous*

I. Introduction

THE ABOVE CURSE WAS WRITTEN IN A TWELFTH-CENTURY EDITION of the Bible issued by the Premonstratensian Abbey of St Mary and St Nicholas in Arnstein, Germany. Throughout the Middle Ages, books were scarce and valuable objects that conferred prestige on the monasteries that possessed them. As such, scribes freighted these precious manuscripts with curses to discourage thievery, often threatening excommunication, dam-

1. See Figure 6d for one version of this curse commonly found in Edwardian books. As illustrated in Figure 6d, not all book owners were master spellers.

nation, or anathema to anybody who dared to loot them. Although the invention of Gutenberg's printing press in 1440 gradually facilitated the accessibility of books to the general public, book owners still sought to protect their acquisitions. By the mid-nineteenth century, bookplates — decorative printed labels bearing the name of the book's owner — were increasingly being stuck onto the endpapers of books for such purposes. Bookplates enabled users to declare ownership through a combination of visual, verbal, and textual resources. For the first time, warning, threatening, and cursing had become multimodal.

This article will explore the role of the book inscription as an important rite of property in Edwardian Britain (1901–1914). In particular, it will examine the use of bookplates and other ownership marks as threats, warnings, and curses, and explore the ways in which they were employed by their owners to deter potential malefactors. The Edwardian era marked a high point in the history of the book in Britain. The creation of public libraries, book clubs, and the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), as well as a dramatic decrease in book production costs due to new mechanised print methods, meant that books became increasingly accessible to all classes in society for the first time (VINCENT 1993, 3–4). Beyond this trend lay an improvement in family incomes and rising levels of literacy, which had emerged as a result of the numerous Education Acts introduced in the late nineteenth century. The Edwardian era was also a period of intense class struggle characterised by a heightened awareness of class consciousness, arising from the disaster of the Anglo Boer War, the surge of trade unions, and the growth of socialism (CARLE, SHAW and SHAW 2018, 3). A fundamental argument that runs throughout this essay is that the exploration of book inscriptions can offer an important new way to explore many of these class tensions in Edwardian Britain. Too often confined to their status as markers of possession, book inscriptions can, in fact, serve as valuable primary sources of information on the general concerns about social class and power that existed in the early twentieth century. When combined with evidence provided in historical records, such as censuses, street directories, and school logbooks, book inscriptions have the ability to make fresh and novel contributions to our current understanding of Edwardian class conflict.

Up until now, only limited studies have been carried out on book inscriptions (e.g., JACKSON 2001, 2005; SHERMAN 2008). More specifically, accounts of book curses and admonitions have only been humorous or anecdotal in nature (e.g., DUNCAN 1977; DROGIN 1983; RAE DOWNTON 2013). Furthermore, these accounts have tended to focus specifically on the

Medieval period, given that the use of book inscriptions to imprecate and exhort became widespread during this age. Arnovick (2006) offered the first scholarly examination of book curses, exploring the tradition through Chaucer's poetic adaptations, while Crain (2016) framed the study of book curses within the broader structures of self-possession, autonomy, and property relations in Victorian society. Plotz (2008) and Wynne (2010) have explored more generally the notions of 'portable property' (everyday culture-bearing objects) and women's personal possessions in Victorian Britain. Scholars, however, have not yet investigated book inscriptions or their connection with ownership in the early twentieth century. Moreover, no previous research on Edwardian book ownership has been carried out from a sociolinguistic perspective. This essay will demonstrate how an interdisciplinary approach that draws on theories and perspectives from ethnography, multimodality, and book history can be beneficial when investigating this inscriptive act.

II. Book Consumption in Edwardian Britain

In the early twentieth century, the British reading population grew at a faster rate than ever before (HUDSON 1965, 326). Publishers sought to profit from the emergence of a new culturally-aspiring mass readership by introducing fresh genres, new modes of design in terms of formats and bindings, and segmented markets based on profession, age, and wealth (McKITTERICK 2009a, 70–2). The increased scale of book production can be reflected in the fact that, by 1911, the paper, printing, and publishing trades had 253,000 employees (VINCENT 1993, 132), while roughly 13,500 titles were being published annually (McKITTERICK 2009b, 114).

The greater availability of books meant that they also began to be distributed more extensively. Books could be purchased from bookshops, stalls, and street barrows or borrowed from the wide range of libraries and clubs that formed part of Edwardian book culture. The outbreak of World War One in 1914 and the subsequent economic collapse resulted in a decrease in the material quality of books as well as in the disposable income people had available to purchase them. Thus, the years between 1901 and 1914 stand as a "Golden Age" in terms of the rich diversity of book production and consumption (HUDSON 1965, 326). For Edwardians, access to books was often a liberating and educational experience that helped them to develop their personal identities and sense of self.

In the late nineteenth century, most books consumed by working-class Britons came from public libraries. Britain's first public library opened in Manchester in 1852 following the Public Libraries Act of 1850, which granted universal free access to information and literature. At their height, public libraries served 62% of the population (TAYLOR, WHITFIELD and BARSON 2016, 3) and issued fifty-four million books per year (ALTICK 1962, 399). Yallop (2011, 38) believes that public libraries grew principally out of the upper-class desire for moral authority and enabled the organisation of people, the enforcement of norms of behaviour, and the promotion of home-approved messages. Hammond (2006) expands, noting that "Victorian moral philanthropy created the public library, while Victorian moral panic insisted that it remain middlebrow and conservative" (195). In other words, if the working classes "were going to be allowed to vote, then they needed to be instructed in the 'right' things" (YALLOP 2011, 38).

The introduction of newspaper-print methods to book production in the early twentieth century marked a pivotal change to book consumption in Edwardian Britain, as it resulted in the emergence of 'cheap editions' (reprints of classic works) and autodidactic series aimed at the working classes (McKITTERICK 2009a, 73). Rose (2010, 7–8) argues that these books challenged the existing social order because they enabled working-class Edwardians to access material of which the public librarians were typically the gatekeepers. Furthermore, the establishment of the WEA in 1903, an organisation that aimed to bring higher education to working-class adults, also played a central role in the growth of book ownership amongst lower-class groups (ROSE 2010, 265). For just 2s 6d a year, members were provided with a range of reading materials on politics, history, and economics. Through these books, the poorest in Britain began to recognise not only the importance of reading as the key to social advancement, but also the significance of personal possession as a weapon of distinction in Britain's hierarchical society.

The growing possibility of book ownership, as opposed to book borrowing, amongst the lower classes also meant that books began to acquire a range of personal meanings that went far beyond their original functions as objects of pleasure or sources of knowledge. Instead, books began to be viewed as status indicators (due to their attractive decorative designs), emblems of pride (as personal possession was strongly linked to self-worth), or statements of intent (particularly for women who had recently been granted legal right to ownership through the 1882 Women's Property Act). Seen through this lens, it becomes clear that book ownership opened up

many opportunities to owners that had not been possible through the borrowing of books from libraries.

III. Exploring Book Ownership and the Privilege of Inscription

One of the chief consequences of ownership is that, unlike borrowing, the owner can do what they wish with the object. Consequently, while library users incurred heavy fines for defacing borrowed books, book owners had the freedom to inscribe their books with personal messages, which Crain (2016) claims transformed them from commercial objects into “primers for modern property relations” (146).

With book ownership now widely available to all classes, owners became increasingly reluctant to share their books with others. Books were seen as reflections of their owners; therefore, any copy returned in a poor state jeopardised the owner’s own social and cultural capital (O’HAGAN 2018, 311). As a result, books were mainly kept within the family and only cautiously exchanged. Although Price (2013, 183) reports some examples of employers sharing books with employees (e.g., masters to servants), this practice was not widespread and often involved passing down rejects rather than borrowing *per se*.

As a result of this democratisation of book ownership, the fear of book theft became very prevalent in Edwardian Britain: while the upper classes were concerned by the high monetary value of their books and their distrust of the ‘masses’, the lower classes sought to protect these material possessions that served as symbols of their stability and credit-worthiness. For these reasons, book curses and threats, which had typically been a Medieval phenomenon, began to experience a renaissance in the early twentieth century. Traditionally, these curses had been hand-written. However, the growing use of mechanisation processes in the printing industry opened up the possibility of printed curses in the form of bookplates.

Although bookplates had been used for many centuries prior, most designs had been limited to armorials showing heraldic symbols relating to the owner’s family heritage. Furthermore, as they were custom-designed by privately commissioned artists, they were only available to the wealthiest in society (O’HAGAN 2018, 48). In the late nineteenth century, stationers and booksellers began to recognise the potential of bookplates as identity markers. Accordingly, they started to offer bookplate design as an in-house service, enabling customers to create their own forms that reflected their

occupations, pastimes, and interests. These pictorials made bookplates accessible to a new middle-class audience (SCOTT 1902, 20). At the turn of the twentieth century, the introduction of stereotyping, a monotype printing system, and chromolithography resulted in the creation of mass-produced bookplates (TWYMAN 2009, 130). These cheap designs radically changed the bookplate market, facilitating working-class access for the first time.²

The increased affordability of bookplates meant that typically handwritten messages, such as book curses and threats, were now being printed instead, whether in custom-designed or mass-produced forms. Through the combination of visual and verbal signs, these curses acquired multiple complex meanings that gave them a powerful sense of “performativity” (AUSTIN 1970). This performativity enabled owners to exploit the ambiguities between various speech acts, thereby declaring possession, while simultaneously warning, threatening, commanding, or cursing. In this way, they present a challenge to classical speech act theory (e.g., SEARLE 1969), but fit more closely with modern understandings of speech acts as multiple events occurring at the same time (e.g., THOMAS 1995).

Although typically not as aggressive as their Medieval counterparts, Edwardian book curses could still be “face-threatening” (BROWN and LEVINSON 1987) in nature, using identity performances that challenged everyday concepts of respect and politeness. Thus, when investigating such marks of possession in Edwardian books, it is useful to consider them as illocutionary acts that operated on a cline of politeness that stretched from mitigated to stronger ownership claims. However, one must remember that these marks alone, no matter how face-threatening, were not enough by themselves to declare possession. As Rose (1994, 18) argues, for ownership to be justified, there must be a shared symbolic system and an audience that understands statements of possession and takes them seriously.

IV. The Study

In order to explore these declarations of ownership, 3,000 Edwardian book inscriptions have been obtained for analysis. These book inscriptions were

2. These mass-produced designs cost between 2s 6d and 6s (£14 to £33.60 in today's currency). In contrast, stationers' designs cost between £2 and £10 (£220 to £1,120 in today's currency) and custom designs ranged between £20 and £50 (£2,240-£5,600 in today's currency).

collected from Bookbarn International (BBI) — the largest second-hand bookshop in the United Kingdom — over a period of nine months. The decision to collect inscriptions from a second-hand bookshop was largely based on the fact that collections in museums and libraries tend to focus almost exclusively on elite writers and distinctive educated individuals (GILLEN and HALL 2010, 170; O'HAGAN 2020, 1). Therefore, they fail to account for other cross-sections of Edwardian society. Given that the Edwardian period was the first in which book ownership occurred across all class groups, this would be a considerable oversight.

BBI stocks over two million antiquarian books, with a heavy preference for nineteenth- and early twentieth-century books, since the opening of its Darwin Rare Books room in 2015. The shop trades books from all genres (fiction and non-fiction), providing that they are in a saleable condition. As a result, its collection ranges from periodicals and religious tracts at one end of the spectrum to limited editions and signed copies at the other. Its extensive selection of book genres and formats means that the inscriptive practices of all class groups in Edwardian Britain can be traced rather than just those of the upper classes. Furthermore, despite its Somerset location, the books in BBI come from all areas of the United Kingdom and are sold to the shop by individual customers from a range of age groups and social backgrounds. Therefore, its books are as representative as possible of the whole of the United Kingdom rather than just one geographical area or type of customer.

Inscriptions were collected manually at BBI through a process of searching shelves for any book, regardless of its genre or author, published and inscribed between 1901 and 1914. The choice not to use the shop's online database system to identify books containing Edwardian inscriptions was made in order to avoid the possibility of collecting an unrepresentative sample of inscriptions with a bias towards the upper classes. This is because BBI only records information on printed inscriptions (i.e., bookplates, prize stickers) or inscriptions by famous figures. Furthermore, this procedure ensured that the sample was not distorted by preconceived ideas about the types of books or authors that were popular in Edwardian Britain. In order to ensure authenticity, the data collection was guided by the following five questions:

- (1) Is there a date of publication in the book?
- (2) Is there a date next to the inscription?

- (3) Are the printing features, colours, and hand-written elements of the inscription in keeping with early twentieth-century resources?
- (4) If the name of the bookplate artist or original bookseller is present, were they active between 1901 and 1914?
- (5) Do census records indicate that the owner was alive between 1901 and 1914?

During the data collection process, it became clear that books from an earlier era than 1901 may still contain Edwardian book inscriptions. It was decided to accept books published before 1901, providing that the inscription was authentically Edwardian. This decision was made since the appearance of an Edwardian inscription in a Victorian book, for example, may highlight the importance of the second-hand book trade in early twentieth-century Britain. Furthermore, St Clair (2004, 3) argues that readers never read texts in the chronological order in which they were first published, nor have they ever confined their reading to contemporary texts only. Thus, any study into the reading practices of a community must consider books written before that period as well.

While many of the reasons for investigating the Edwardian era have been outlined in previous sections, it is worth briefly highlighting one additional methodological factor critical to this research. Unlike later periods, all Edwardian archival documents are openly available within the public domain due to the passing of the one-hundred-year embargo on accessing personal information (NATIONAL ARCHIVES 2015). This means that all book owners can be researched using census documents, street directories, and school records, which can provide useful supplementary sociocultural information when carrying out analysis.

As, by their very nature, book inscriptions cross linguistic, historical, literary, and sociological boundaries, this study deploys a multimodal ethnohistorical methodology. This methodology builds upon the growing trend in literacy studies to co-apply social semiotics and ethnography when exploring multimodal texts and artifacts (cf. PAHL and ROWSELL, 2006, 2010), yet employs a historical lens, combining multimodal analysis with archival evidence rather than first-hand observations and interviews. Within the context of book inscriptions, multimodality emphasises the materiality of inscriptions through their pictorial, typographical, textural, and colour features, while ethnohistory relies on historical records (i.e., censuses, street directories, military records) to explore the creator(s) of the

inscription(s) and their sociohistorical context. Overall, a multimodal ethnohistorical approach leads to grounded, theorised, and detailed insights into book inscriptions as “active life presences” (ROWSELL 2011, 334) that signal elements of a person’s lived experiences that might otherwise be hidden by thinking of ethnography only in terms of participant observation. Furthermore, the addition of tools and theories from book history enables the inscriptions to be considered as cultural artefacts and elucidates the social factors that govern their production, dissemination, and reception.

V. Analysis

The inscriptions that will be analysed in the following section were written by both adults and children. Nonetheless, the number of adult examples clearly outweigh those by children. The possible explanation for this is threefold. First, most children lacked the economic means to purchase books for themselves; instead, they had to rely on receiving book as gifts or prizes. In these cases, the inscriptions were written by the giver (i.e., parent, Sunday school teacher) rather than the recipient (i.e., the child). Second, children were considered to have no property rights in Edwardian Britain. Therefore, a child’s book inscription as an ownership claim was likely to be challenged by their parents, the book’s legal owners (O’HAGAN 2018, 87). Finally, the use of bookplates was largely regarded as an adult practice, partially due to their high cost, but also due to the fact that their production required negotiations and meetings with artists, stationers, or booksellers. Consequently, most children’s inscriptions, if at all present, tend to be handwritten rather than printed. This demonstrates that, despite book ownership being an emancipating experience, inscriptions could, at times, reinforce unequal power structures between the old and young.

V.i. If lost, please return to . . .

Once books are purchased, Jackson (2001, 19) argues that the first instinct of most owners is to stake a claim and establish possession. This is typically carried out by marking a name that identifies the proprietor and serves as a symbolic and physical marker of the appropriation. The bestowal of a name gives a person an identity. Together, the name and identity work as a symbolic contract between the society and the individual: the name

confirms the individual's existence and acknowledges the responsibilities of society towards them (DELUZAIN 1996, 2). This broader relationship with society is particularly explicit in ownership marks that feature additional pieces of information, such as the date, location, or address of the owner. In some inscriptions, the owner's name is also accompanied by a note requesting *if lost, please return to*. . . (see Fig. 1). These declarations of possession use subtle references and mitigated forms to instruct any potential readers about who the owner is. This form of inscription was predominantly used by lower-class adults and children, which suggests that they did not have the disposable income to purchase printed designs (i.e., bookplates) to express personal ownership. For these groups, who may have had to save for many months before being able to afford a book, it was imperative to leave an address to ensure that the volume was returned to them.

Although the book is often characterised as a private space in which to impart experiences, observations, and reflections, this type of inscription betrays an awareness of its potential to be read by others. In calling upon a potential reader to return the book if found, the inscription transforms into a type of "imitation talking" (ONG 2006, 143) that emerges as a product of consciousness as shaped by print culture. Through the inscription, the owner declares possession, while simultaneously denying wrongful appropriation. Thus, the inscription gives meaning and structure to the writer's life, as they are able to construct their own discursive space in which to articulate their desires and define their position in relation to others and the world. In this way, the inscription becomes a means of both self-expression and self-protection, not just reflecting life but also constructing it (CRAIN 2016, 110).

The *if lost, please return to*. . . sub-genre of possession is not unique to books. It can also be found in other intimate scribal practices, such as diaries, address books, and letters, as well as other physical possessions, including clothing (e.g., labels marked on children's school clothes), luggage (e.g., suitcase tags), and pets (e.g., dog collars). More contemporary applications often provide a comical adoption of this traditional practice. Printed t-shirts with such phrases as *if found, please return to the pub/bed/wife* can be bought from many retailers. This 'hybrid' use of the phrase shakes up our pre-conceived ideas of its meaning and challenges our schemata to produce schema-refreshment (COOK 1994). The instant recognition of its original context of use also highlights how firmly ingrained this literary set phrase has become on a cultural level.

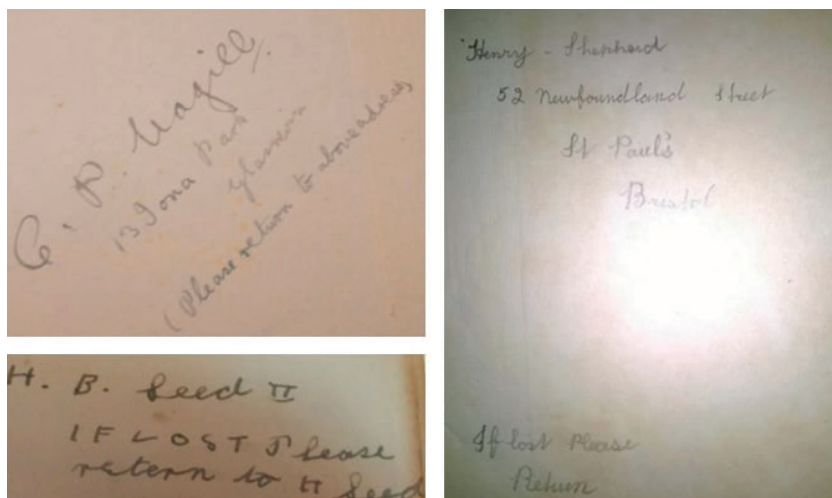


Figure 1. *If lost, please return to . . .* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

V.ii. *This book belongs to . . .*

In addition to *if lost, please return to . . .*, perhaps one of the most recognised ways in which to mark book ownership is *this book belongs to . . .* This phrase clearly establishes a direct relationship between the owner and the object of possession. *This book belongs to . . .* is the only inscription type in the dataset that is used almost exclusively by children. This may be because the set phrase is frequently printed on the front endpapers of children's books, inviting them to inscribe their name. Through repeated exposure to this format, *this book belongs to . . .* develops into a learned practice that children replicate onto blank endpapers, often accompanying it with their address to ensure that the ownership claim is explicit.

As the book represents one of children's first encounters with private property, the use of the *this book belongs to . . .* inscription indicates that they know how to participate in a knowledge system that requires an authorising signature as a seal of authenticity (CRAIN 2016, 119). By inscribing their name under the oft-printed phrase, the child is practising the type of consent associated with the contractual obligations and ideology of ownership. However, there is some ambiguity in terms of whether the book legally belongs to the child or, rather, to their parent or guardian. Thus, *this book belongs to . . .* acts as a performance of the property

rite, while simultaneously asserting a right to property. In doing so, it also implicitly makes a claim for one's status as not owned by oneself.

Interestingly, the scant examples of *this book belongs to* . . . used by adults appear on mass-produced bookplates only, which were aimed at the lower classes (see Fig. 2a). In these cases, the bookplate designs typically feature babies or young children reading books. Similar designs have been found in the Edwardian postcard and advertising genres. It is perhaps significant that the lower classes, who were patronisingly deemed infantile by upper-class Edwardians (SWAFFORD 2007, 30), were targeted by bookplate manufacturers with such childish prompts.

In most custom-designed bookplates, which were aimed at middle- and upper-class adults, the Latin *ex libris* (*from the books of* . . .) was favoured over *this book belongs to* . . ., and was often followed by the owner's name and identificatory images. Latin may have been the preferred choice because it was considered the language of the noble (BAUER 1998, 132). The use of *ex libris* (see Fig. 2b) rather than its English counterpart *this book belongs to* . . . can be considered a politer declaration of possession, as it gives animacy to the inanimate 'book'. By making the 'book' the subject of the phrase, the act is softened and the focus of possession becomes the object itself rather than the owner who possesses it. The class-based differences between users of *ex libris* and users of *this book belongs to* . . . bookplates also fits well with Edwardian stereotypes regarding lower-class language as coarser and more direct compared to the sophisticated and indirect language of the upper classes (PHILLIPS 1984).

This can also be seen in the use of *my book* in the mass-produced bookplates aimed at the lower classes. This preference for the English *my book* over the Latin *ex libris* provides a more direct indication of ownership in which the deictic marker 'my' serves as a type of social deixis that aims to create distinct social groupings — i.e., this book belongs to *me*; therefore, it does not belong to *you*. 'My book' has a formal and quasi-contractual performative quality that embodies and enacts a type of literacy contract. The expression not only declares physical ownership of the book itself, but also of the system of experiences, rights, and privileges that the book and the act of inscribing represent (CRAIN 2016, 118). This need to stress ownership may have been particularly important for members of the lower classes, considering that many had never previously owned books, and thus regarded them as precious artefacts.

A slight variation of *my book* is the third person 'his' or 'her' book (see Fig. 2c), which appear primarily in middle- and upper-class bookplates and

are described by Crain (2016) as English “trying hard to make a genitive case” (113). These unusual forms, which come from the incorrect Early Modern English belief that the s-genitive was derived from the pronoun ‘his’ (e.g., John’s books – John his book), were still widely espoused in Edwardian classrooms, which may explain their broad application in bookplates. These forms are more indirect, as the burden of ownership is depersonalised, separating the owner from the actual act of possession. The indirectness, and therefore less face-threatening nature, of these inscriptions may also explain why they were favoured by Edwardians who were higher up the social scale.

Another interesting deviation from the *ex libris* phrase is *liber meus*, a Latin calque of the English *my book*. *Liber meus* retains the same face-threatening level as its English equivalent and warns any potential readers to whom the book belongs. Surprisingly, given the belief that indirect forms were favoured by the upper classes (PHILLIPS 1984), the use of *liber meus* is confined to upper-class Edwardians. It is possible that they used this Latin phrase to distinguish themselves from the new lower-class consumers of bookplates and to provide a more direct affirmation of possession than *ex libris*. This decision may also have been influenced by their suspicion of the ‘masses’ and the possibility of their books being stolen by members.

The bookplate of Helen Dunham (see Fig. 2d) provides an explicit example of this. Helen was an Edwardian socialite³ who is immortalised in the 1892 portrait drawn by John Singer Sargent. Not only is her bookplate written in Latin, but it also features quotes from St Catherine of Siena (in Italian) and Germaine de Staël (in French), and was designed by G.E. Weeson — a leading artist of the early twentieth century. These features highlight her high social class and the important role that bookplates played not just in establishing personal possession, but also using individual symbols and messages to distinguish possession from others. In this way, Helen’s symbols act as signatures, as they develop into a personal hieroglyph that presents her and her character to the world. Jacoby (1938, cited in SASOON 1999) calls such signatures “the psychological visiting card of a person” (76).

3. All inscribers have been identified using the 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891, 1901 and 1911 UK censuses, when relevant, as well as Civil Registration Birth, Marriage, and Death Indexes, and UK and Ireland Incoming and Outward Passenger Lists.

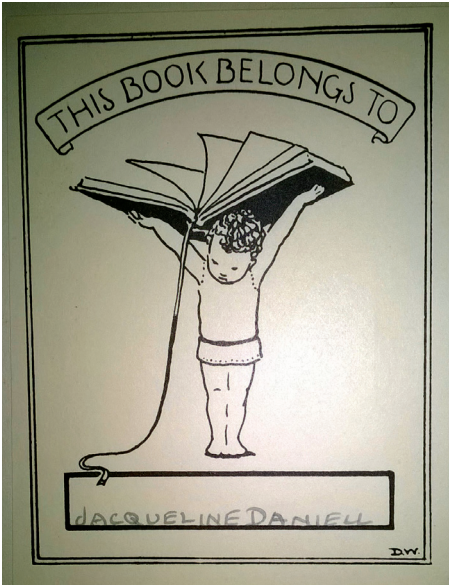


Figure 2a. *This book belongs to. . .* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

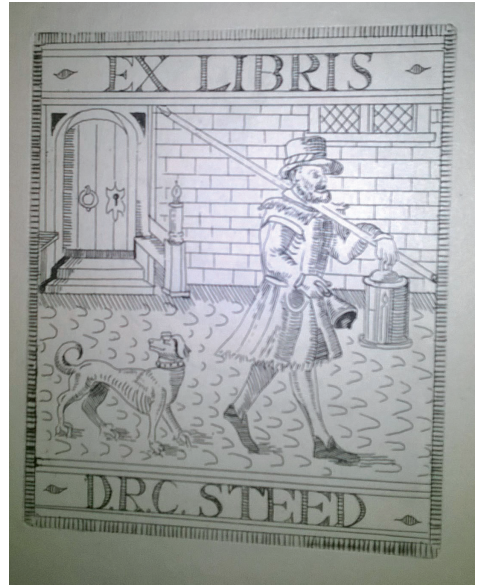


Figure 2b. *Ex libris.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

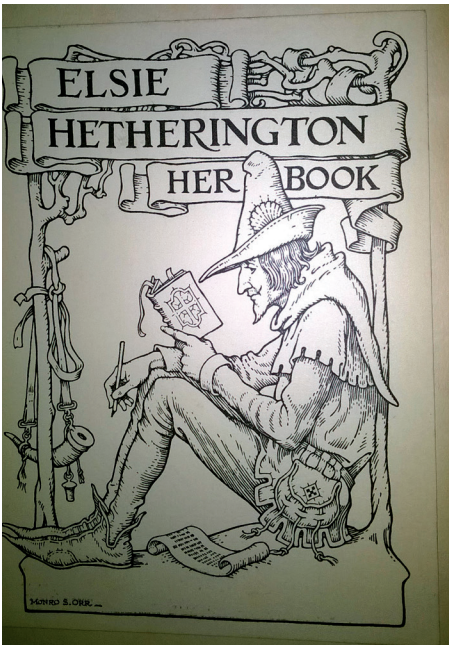


Figure 2c. *Her book.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.



Figure 2d. *Liber meus.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

V.iii. *Neither a borrower nor a lender be*

Although the above phrase was originally used in *Hamlet* within the context of lending money, its meaning encompasses a sub-genre of inscription that uses rhymes to warn of the dangers of loaning books to friends. These book inscriptions are complex entities that differ from the previous ones, as they suggest that the books' owners are at least willing to consider sharing their books with others; however, in some ways, by challenging and criticising the character of a potential reader, they are also more openly face-threatening. While these rhymes were traditionally written directly onto the flyleaves of books, by the Edwardian era they had become so popular that they had begun to be reproduced on custom-designed bookplates.

These types of bookplates tended to feature the owner's name in bold at the top of the page. In some cases, this was accompanied by the owner's address, the stern *this book is the property of . . .* and the manicule (☞). This symbol was frequently used in Medieval scribal practices to direct the reader's attention to important text. By drawing upon this traditional convention in Edwardian bookplates, owners could implicitly remind clued-in readers of the book curses that were once used to deter thieves. The inclusion of poems and rhymes (see Fig. 3) mitigated the impact of these potentially offensive and accusatory statements of possession and may explain why, despite their childlike nature, they were generally created by adults. In using these rhymes, adults could establish the boundaries of sharing books, while playfully alluding to traditional school playground culture whereby after an argument a child often tells a fellow classmate that they no longer wish to be friends with them. When used within this context, the rhyme associates the book owner with a particular group, culture, and history, and establishes them as a member who is aware of inside jokes, threats, and language (CRAIN 2016, 118).

The bookplates of Betty Grundtvig (a stage actress and friend of Noel Coward) and Harold T. Barrow (a religious history author) show the same rhyme. This *if thou art borrowed by a friend* rhyme occurs frequently throughout the collected dataset and emphasises how these poems became widely dispersed and culturally embedded in Edwardian society as books were circulated among people within a community. Through their circulation, they rise beyond being valid ownership claims and transform into cultural artefacts that speak more broadly about Edwardian customs and conventions.

If thou art borrowed by a friend begins with the owner addressing the book rather than speaking directly to the potential borrower (who is referred to in third person). This subtle narrative stance enables the book owner

to avoid directly warning the borrower. The need to maintain politeness is particularly necessary, considering that the borrower is likely to be a friend. In line 5, there is a clear change in style as the owner anticipates the possibility that the book might be lent to a third party and explains the problems that might occur. Hayes (1997, 91) sees these lines as a type of “refutation” that serve to support the previous statement. The owner concludes by arguing that it is okay to disseminate knowledge, but their property must be protected. This belief is exemplified by the space at the bottom of Harold T. Barrow’s bookplate for borrowers to leave their remarks. Thus, in its arrangement, this poem can be said to represent the rules or etiquette of book borrowing, stressing the fact that a borrowed book should not be lent to somebody else.

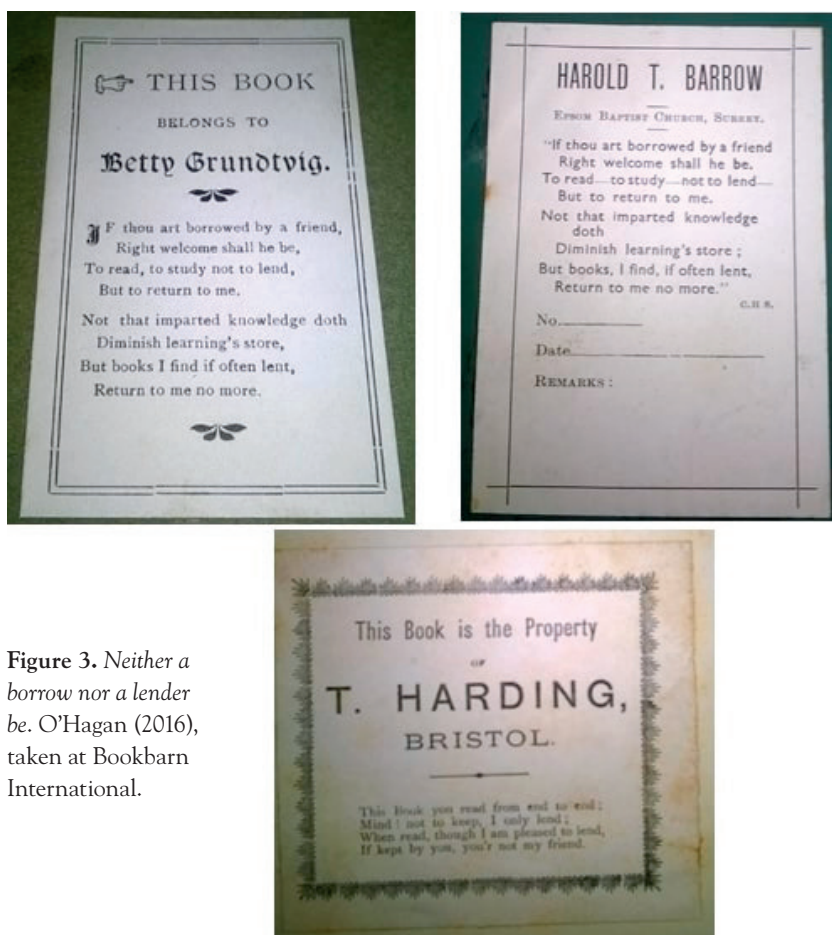


Figure 3. *Neither a borrow nor a lender be.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

V.iv. *When found make a note of!*

Humour is another mitigating device that some Edwardian book owners drew upon in a bid to soften the declaration of ownership. Although examples of humour have been found in inscriptions dating back to the Middle Ages (see REIMANN 2015), its use was enhanced in the late nineteenth century by the emergence of pictorial bookplates, which enabled visual messages to work alongside their verbal counterparts to produce powerful meanings. For many Edwardian adults, particularly those of the lower-middle class, the pictorial bookplate came to be seen as an opportunity to further develop the book rhyme sub-genre. The lower-middle classes emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as increased numbers of working-class people obtained positions in new, white-collar, salaried occupations and moved to the suburbs. Members of this group were keen to carve their own niche in society. However, they were often met with suspicion by the middle and upper classes who viewed them as people with “unconquered aspirations who (were) divorced from the realities of life in an artificial city civilisation” (MASTERMAN 1909, 94). For this reason, they became highly conscious of social etiquette and the unspoken rules of Edwardian society (CROSSICK 1979, 29). This may explain why members of this group were the most likely to use humour in bookplates to play down ownership claims.

The example in Figure 4a (see below) shows the rhyme *if perchance this book should stray | kindly send it on its way* accompanied by an image of a wandering book on legs. Here, the visual accentuates the message of the verbal. The image offers a humorous, physical representation of the book roaming aimlessly, which tones down the request to return the book to its owner. The juxtaposition of the quaint cottage surrounded by flowers and the man on the roof waving a large beacon provides an amusing depiction of the book’s path back home. Like the *this book belongs to . . .* example, this bookplate has a blank space that ‘invites’ the inscriber to sign their name. The hand-written, as opposed to printed, name of the owner indicates that the bookplate was mass-produced, which further suggests that its owner was lower class. This is confirmed by census records that show that L. Bevan Jones was a Welsh Baptist minister and son of a missionary. Coming from a family in which material possessions were not readily accessible, owning and maintaining possession of a book would have been especially important for Jones. Furthermore, as a member of the clergy, it is likely that Jones was highly aware of the need to maintain politeness and follow Biblical guidelines on sharing. Humour is possibly one way in which he sought to balance his professional duty with his personal concerns.

Similarly, the bookplate in Figure 4b (see below) provides a unique example of the use of humour to warn potential thieves. The man in the bookplate is Captain Cuttle, one of the protagonists in Dickens' novel *Dombey and Son*. Cuttle uses his hook hand to point to the text *when found make a note of*, which is a phrase that he uses frequently throughout *Dombey and Son* when he hears something important and wants to write it down. This intertextual reference provides instructions to readers on what they must do if they encounter the book and warns them light-heartedly not to steal it. The combination of the material process of pointing and the verbal process of speaking emphasises the message of returning the book. The non-standard syntax, bold capital letters, exclamation mark, and the off-centre position of Cuttle also draws attention to the message and reinforces its impact. The way in which Cuttle is standing, his left leg forward, left hand on hip and right hand pointing, as well as the position of his hat and cane on the floor behind him, highlight the serious tone of its message. However, Cuttle's hand in pocket, slight grin, and open body language blend the severity of the image with humour, creating an element of "verbo-visual irony" (SCOTT 2004, 40). The bookplate's warning is also further mitigated by an understanding of the sociocultural context surrounding its production. Census records show that the owner, Walter Dexter, was a bookshop owner and editor of the *Dickensian* magazine. Thus, his use of a Dickens character to mark ownership would likely have been recognised and met warmly by friends, further reducing its potentially serious message.

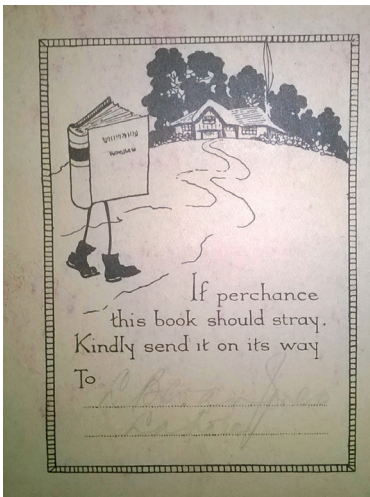


Figure 4a. *If per chance this book should stray.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

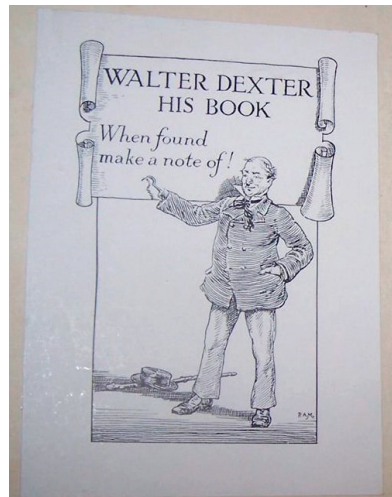


Figure 4b. *When found make a note of!* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

V.v. *The wicked borroweth, and returneth not again*

Some of the more forbidding Medieval scribal traditions were carried over into the Edwardian era, particularly those that equated book theft to evil and wickedness and invoked God's wrath for committing such acts. Although religion had become a minority habit in the early twentieth century, with just 20% of Edwardians attending church on a regular basis (THOMPSON 1992, 173), only 1% of the population considered themselves atheist and 55% still believed in an afterlife (FIELD 2013, 62). Thus, threatening potential thieves with displeasing God still served as an effective means of dissuasion. These types of inscription were particularly favoured by the middle and upper classes who believed not only that the lower classes were most likely to steal, but also that it was their role to instil habits of obedience in these 'unruly' people (O'HAGAN 2018, 89).

For many book owners, a simple Bible quote was added to their book-label to remind thieves of the consequences of their actions. Joy King Tiller's (an upper-middle-class 'lady of leisure') *the wicked borroweth, and returneth not again* comes from Psalm 37:21 (see Fig. 5a) — a response to the problem of evil conveyed by David. In the Bible, the line is followed by the statement that he who does not return will live under God's curse. This curse thus continues the long tradition that began in the Middle Ages.

Other owners reused popular Medieval inscriptions, as can be seen in the bookplate of Evelyn Lawrence Dunlop (see Fig. 5b), an upper-middle-class historian from Camberley in Surrey. Here, a direct quote from Bald's *Leechbook* is employed, warning "in the name of Christ" that "no treacherous person" steal this book. Using a phrase like *in the name of Christ* acts simultaneously as both a threat and a command, thus in line with Thomas's (1995) discussion of multiple speech acts that occur synchronously. This is particularly effective if we consider the phrase's history. John 14:14 states, "If you ask anything in My name, I will do it". Thus, directing "in the name of Christ" strengthens the command and, in doing so, suggests to any potential thieves that Evelyn will receive the divine protection that she requires.

In other bookplates, verbal warnings are accompanied by visual depictions of the consequences. These signs work together to help convey meaning. The bookplate of Rudolf Benkard, for example, shows a man running away from a bookshelf with a book under his arm. "Stop! My Book!" is written in German above. In the top right hand corner, a large hand comes down from the clouds in the sky and attempts to grab the thief. Western readers are likely to follow the typical linear reading path and read this

bookplate from left to right (KRESS and VAN LEEUWEN 2006), a linearity that imposes a syntagma on the reader that describes the sequence and connection between each element. Thus, *Halt! Mein Buch!* is understood as being said by God. This idea that God is, in fact, the owner of the stolen book places a stronger onus on the thief, as he is faced with both the possibility of displeasing God and the risk of being smote down by him if he dares steal. Rudolf Benkard was a distinguished judge. For any potential thieves who knew of Benkard's high reputation, this may have dissuaded them from stealing, if the inscription on the bookplate alone did not.

Another image that is typically used in bookplates to warn potential thieves is the Eye of Providence — the symbol of an eye surrounded by rays of light, which represents the eye of God watching over humanity. The bookplate of Dr. Georg Abelsdorff in Figure 5c⁴ (see below) features a large eye in the top-centre surrounded by beams of light. In this context, the eye acts as a sign that warns any potential thieves of God's omnipresence. However, the use of historical records to research the bookplate owner also provides this Eye of Providence with additional meanings. Firstly, Abelsdorff was an ophthalmologist; thus, the eye may be a visual representation of his profession. However, more importantly, Abelsdorff was also a registered member of the freemasons, a society that uses the Eye as part of their standard iconography. Abelsdorff's professional identity is also represented by the open book of Albert von Graefe (a German ophthalmologist) on the table, while the entwined G and A at the top of the bookplate do more than simply spell his initials. Pitts-Taylor (2008, 112) notes that freemasons often replace the Eye with the letter G, which represents both God and the art of geometry. Thus, in this bookplate, not only do the combined symbols of vision stress the importance of religion, freemasonry, and ophthalmology in the life of Abelsdorff, but they also emphasise that there is a higher being watching over everything that we do. This acts as a deterrent for anybody considering stealing the book.

4. This image is reproduced from a copy of the bookplate held at Harvey Cushing and John Hay Whitney Medical Library, Yale University, as the original BBI image did not come out clearly (<http://whitney.med.yale.edu/gsd/cgi-bin/library?c=bkplates&a=d&d=DbkplatescwbpCAAC>). The image is in the public domain.

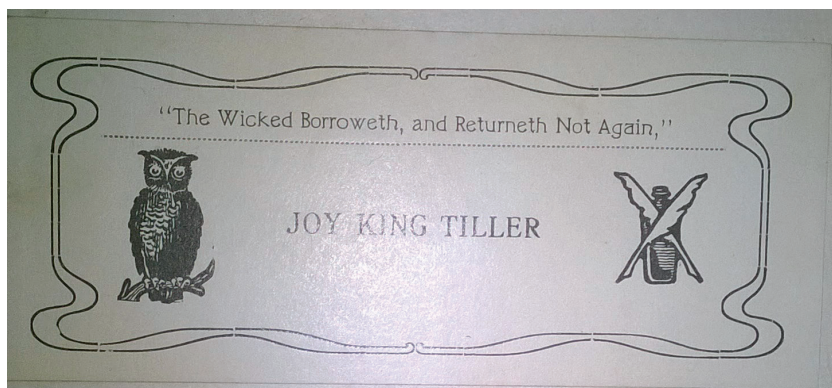


Figure 5a. *The wicked borroweth and returneth not again.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

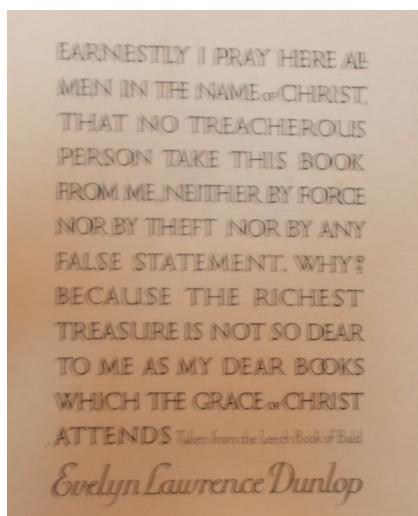


Figure 5b. *Earnestly I pray.* O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.



Figure 5c. *Eye of Providence.* Public domain image from Harvey Cushing and John Hay Whitney Medical Library, Yale University.

**V.vi. *The pillory with ye should this
book fail to return to me!***

The most face-threatening messages to be found in Edwardian books were those that openly cautioned potential thieves that they would be beaten or, worse still, murdered if they dared to steal them. These types of inscriptions are perhaps the most interesting because they are found across books owned by both adults and children, with, however, opposing objectives. For most children, these strong messages were considered cheeky and slightly daring. Therefore, they were used not with their original intention of harming a potential thief, but rather to play around with social codes of acceptability and perhaps shock or disturb family and friends. Adults, on the other hand, did inscribe these messages with the hope that they would discourage thievery. The fact that they were largely used by upper-class Edwardians and inscribed in books of high monetary worth is surely key.

The rhymes in Figure 6a (see below) were all written by the same person — a 10-year-old boy at Oundle boarding school. Attending a school in which many pupils all lived together, F.S. Batey would have felt especially inclined to protect his private property in any way that he could. He may also have deliberately chosen to inscribe face-threatening messages to play up to the competitive all-male environment in which he was growing up.

The use of *stick no bills* next to Batey's name and address is reminiscent of signs that warn that posters or notices cannot be put up in a particular area because it is private property. When used within the boundaries of his book, this phrase serves as an immediate reminder to potential thieves that the book is the property of Batey. All of the subsequent rhymes that Batey has written were well-established in popular culture by the Edwardian era (O'HAGAN 2018, 319). According to Vygotsky (1981), children learn through imitation. It helps them to develop a vocabulary that enables them to name and navigate the world around them, as well as to gain a deeper comprehension of the social structures that define them. Thus, Batey is likely to have seen these book rhymes and curses previously and used them to try and make sense of his communicative role as a socially situated producer.

As well as imitation, the most striking aspect of these inscriptions is the use of repetition. Typically, one warning would be enough to impede potential thieves; here, Batey uses six warnings. This disturbance of the typical conventions of book rhymes somewhat turns the practice from a face-threatening act into a mischievous novelty that downplays any real threat. The rhyme *black is the raven, black is the rook | but blacker is the*

person who steals this book evokes school playground clapping games, which risks the child's attempt at protecting property not being taken seriously. This is exemplified in Aldous Huxley's (1921) *Crome Yellow* when Denis encounters the journal of Jenny, which is protected by the aforementioned curse. Denis laughs at the rhyme and calls its usage 'childish'. He then proceeds to read the journal. Although a fictional example, this highlights how if a potential thief does not consider the threat to be credible, its demands will not be respected. This was a problem that children, in particular, faced, as many adults viewed their rhymes as nothing more than innocent chaff.

This issue that children encountered is clearly illustrated when comparing Batey's rhyme *this book is one thing, my fist another | steal not the one, you fear of the other* with A.K. Barton's (see Fig. 6b) similar *this book is one and God's curse is another | he who takes one, God give him the other*. Although both examples stress the importance of honesty and friendship, as well as any potential punishment, the threats are likely to be taken a lot more seriously when they come from a fully-grown adult instead of a young child. Thus, the force of these directives is only effective if the thief believes that the owner has the ability to act upon the threat: i.e., it is unlikely that a child will punch a potential thief, but it is possible that an adult could kill them. The fact that Barton's bookplate is printed, as opposed to handwritten, also strengthens its impact, while the use of the words 'God' and 'curse', as well as the implication of 'death', make the force of this message far stronger.

In many of the printed bookplates, book owners threatened potential thieves with brutal deaths rather than mere physical harm. These deaths typically involved two forms: the pillory (medieval stocks used for physical punishment) and the gallows (execution by hanging). The image in Figure 6c (see below) shows a thief padlocked into the pillory awaiting his fate. Although the last use of the pillory in England was in 1830 (BEADLE and HARRISON 2007, 53), its association with theft remained prevalent throughout the Edwardian era and still survives today. Upon seeing the image of the pillory, any potential book thieves would have recalled the public humiliation of being pelted with rotten food, excrement, and stones, or in extreme cases, being subjected to flagellation, branding, and cropping (ear removal). This would have made them think twice about stealing the book.

The poem about the gallows in Figure 6d (see below) was the most common form of book curse in Victorian and Edwardian Britain and appears throughout the dataset in handwritten and printed forms. This rhyme

represents a clear face-threatening act, stating that the punishment for stealing the book will be death by hanging. Hanging was the most severe punishment for committing a crime in Edwardian Britain (CLARK 2017, 1) and, as such, its reference in a book curse served as a very real threat to the book thief. The use of the horizontal rule to mark the end of the rhyme also serves as a symbolic representation of the end of the thief's life.

The *steal not this book my honest friend* poem has also been analysed by Crain (2016) in her study of Victorian book inscriptions. She argues that although the poem directly addresses the potential thief, the 'honest friend' is just one addressee. The first reader is the inscriber themselves who has managed to safeguard their book for another day, while the other is the reader who is invoked by the act of inscription. As Crain (2016, 118) notes, this reader can be both feared (the thief) and desired (the sympathetic and penitent reader). Alternatively, the thief's presence may only be proved by the absence of the book inscribed to them. In this inscription, the inscriber is beseeching this 'unknown' reader to do the right thing and never steal the book. Although as modern readers, we know that we are not the 'honest friend', the direct address of the poem connects us with its content. Thus, the rhyme serves not only to protect the book from theft but also to protect the owner from any other type of danger that loss of the book may entail. Crain (2016, 118) describes this as a "charmed cultural circle" that shields the owner from any external perils.

Another common image used to discourage thievery was a hand being stabbed as it tried to steal a book. In many cases, the image was supported by the declarative statement *I will protect my book*, warning the thief that the owner is willing to go to extremes to stop their book from being stolen. These images employed black shading to show blood pouring from the thief's hand. However, examples have been found of owners emphasising this potential injury by shading the blood in red ink. This red stands out in vivid relief against the monochrome print of the bookplate, effectively accentuating the message. Van Leeuwen (2011) notes that red is a colour of high saturation associated with danger, passion, and anger. As readers, we draw upon these sociocultural connotations when interpreting such bookplates, which makes their message particularly effective. Owners' personalisation of such bookplates indicates how one can derive more personal meanings from their generic messages. Thus, it is clear that even mass-produced bookplates cannot be seen as mere "meaningless assemblages of generic sentiment" (JAFKE 1999, 138). Even with their limited room for manoeuvre in terms of identity construction, Edwardians were still able to construct their own meaning from them.

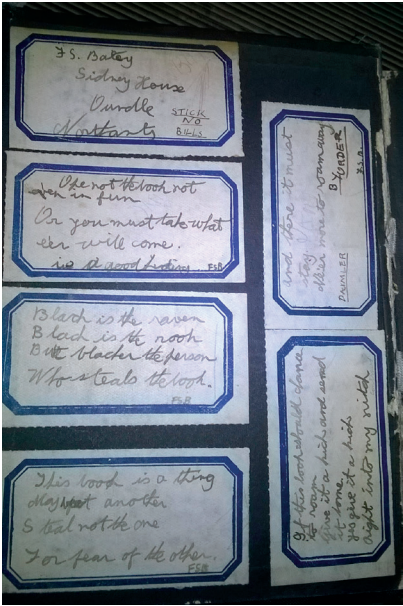


Figure 6a. Threatening rhymes. O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

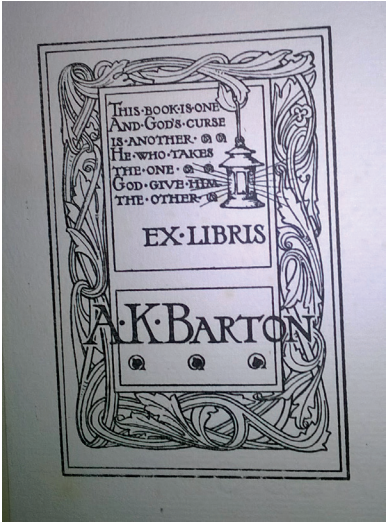


Figure 6b. This book is one thing and God's curse is another. O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

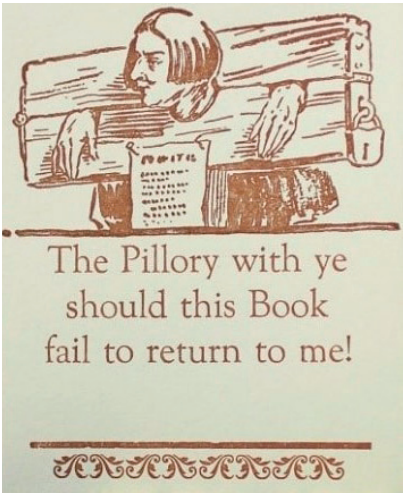


Figure 6c. The pillory with ye. O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

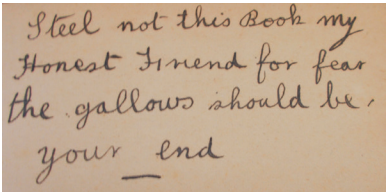


Figure 6d. Steel [sic] not this Book my Honest Friend. O'Hagan (2016), taken at Bookbarn International.

VI. Concluding Remarks

Regardless of their level of face threat, all of these inscriptions were aimed at a type of future reader that the owner distrusted and did not deem worthy of accessing the book. This demonstrates that, despite typically being considered as private objects, books were expected to be accessed within the public domain. As suggested at the beginning of this article, it can, thus, be useful to think of marks of possession in Edwardian books as operating on a cline of politeness that stretches from mitigated to stronger ownership claims. It can also be useful to recognise that these marks did not merely express a threat or a warning; these marks were also accompanied by other simultaneous speech acts, such as commanding or asserting, which were linked to the broad concepts of ownership, property rights, and legality in Edwardian society.

Figure 7 (see below) shows that the least face-threatening acts were those that shifted agency to the book rather than the owner or used hedging expressions and mitigating devices to play down the importance of ownership (i.e. *if found, please return . . .*, *from the library of . . .*, *ex libris . . .*). At the other end of the scale, the most face-threatening acts threatened the thief with death, injury, or curses. In these inscriptions, pictures, colour, and typography were all frequently employed to emphasise the severity of the threat. References to evil and invoking God's wrath were also strong face-threatening acts, yet their impact was slightly reduced by the fact that they did not usually threaten the thief with death. Finally, expressions such as *my book*, *liber meus*, and *this book belongs to . . .*, as well as the use of jocular rhymes and humour, represented minor face-threatening acts, as they boldly declared ownership, but did not admonish others with harm.

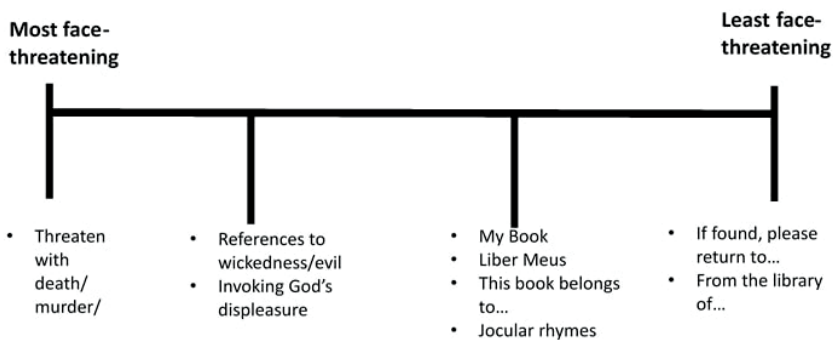


Figure 7. Cline of politeness in Edwardian book inscriptions. O'Hagan (2018).

Although this study has demonstrated the long tradition of books carrying warnings, threats, and curses, this does not mean that the utterances were always successful in their objectives. While in the Medieval period book curses appeared to carry a very serious threat of punishment, by the Edwardian era, in many cases, the book curse was seen as a 'quirky' practice that many book owners followed out of adherence to tradition rather than to pose any real threat to potential thieves (CRAIN 2016, 116). This meant that many adults' ownership marks were written out of concern for following well-established social norms rather than dictating the consequences of book theft, while most children were influenced by the 'shock factor' of certain extreme curses and their potential reactions by peers.

Of these marks, children's were least likely to be taken seriously, and were most often passed off as mere disobedience or humorous attempts to copy adult practices. However, even in cases when adult book owners attempted to use curses as credible threats, these inscriptions could only operate pragmatically as admonitions that urged readers not to interfere with the inscriber's wishes. Not only was their effectiveness dependent upon the readers' actions, but their force as credible threats came solely from their actual implementation, which was unlikely to be possible without taking the law into one's own hands. For this reason, Arnovick (2006, 427) argues that book curses are "strong directives" rather than declarative statements that act as "commissive promises" (SEARLE 1969) that cannot be realised unless the relevant situation (i.e., the theft) occurs. Thus, the physical action referenced in the inscriptions is constrained by sincerity conditions and restricted to possible future events that may (or may not) be detrimental to the book and its owner.

Despite the potential ineffectiveness of these inscriptions, it is clear that within an Edwardian context, book curses and threats were strongly related to both performance and social class. The increasing accessibility of bookplates meant that inscribers could now use visual and verbal signs to reiterate existing statuses and relationships, as well as to propose or express new identities in interaction. This empowered the inscriptions with "symbolic capital" (BOURDIEU 1986, 246), as they functioned symbolically to index and display ownership, property rights, and power. This was particularly important in the early twentieth century, as it marked a period of vast social change that threatened to unbalance the hierarchical structure of Edwardian society. Thus, not only can Edwardian book curses and threats be viewed as significant markers of class-based differences, but it is perhaps possible that an owner's commitment and actual ability to carry out the inscribed actions was strongly linked to his or her social

status in Edwardian society. This complexity of Edwardian book curses, threats, and warnings underlines the fact that, although book inscriptions may seem insignificant markers of possession, they are important primary sources for exploring class conflict in Edwardian Britain.

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